The History of Hip Hop and Rap Music

Kimberly Alexandre

English 101

Professor Kingsley

One cannot study Rap music without studying what is commonly known as ‘Hip Hop’ culture. “Rap is an integral part of this culture that did not exist or evolve in isolation from its other major components.” (The Evolution of Rap Music in The United States) rap music is a musical genre which consists of rhythmic vocal style used by the artist with background beats. The hip hop culture and subculture of rap music began in the borough of Bronx, New York City in the mid 1970s predominately among African Americans and Hispanics. The art of rapping is a vocal style of which the artist and/ performer rhythmically and in rhyme, oftentimes to a beat. Rapping can be in poetic form written ahead of time or it can be improvised rhyming on the spot accompanied by or without a beat. This form is generally known as ‘free-styling’.

Hip hop arose in the urban parts of New York City when DJs came up with the idea of the technique of isolating the percussion break from funk, dub, disco, rock songs, etc. and used the beats that were left on the track for audiences to dance to. Originally, the role of the MC was to introduce the DJ or the performing artist(s) and to keep the audience excited. The MC would oftentimes speak between songs, give exhortations to dance, greet the members of the audience, to joke and for anecdotes. Today, the role of the MC is replaced by the DJ and the MCs’ practice is more stylized. By 1979, hip hop had become a commercially recorded genre of music, and began to enter the American musical and artistic mainstream as well across the world. By the 1990s, a more aggressive form of rap, called ‘gangsta rap’ had become a major part of American music, causing significant controversy over the lyrical content perceived in popular songs by some as promoting violence, promiscuity, drug use and misogyny. Despite all this, hip hop has continued to increase in popularity, has gained more of a diverse fan- base, and by 2000, rap music has become a staple of popular music charts world-wide.

An attitude borne out of music, hip hop has moved from the basements, stairwells and streets of the South Bronx projects and urban settings of America to some of the world’s farthest nooks and crannies. There are many components to the roots of hip hop culture as well as the subculture of rap. The roots of hip hop are primarily found in African American and West African music. A group of traveling singers, poets and storytellers, referred to as ‘griots’ , from West Africa are the main influences in the musical style which composes hip hop. Their oral tradition dates back hundreds of years to the history of slavery and their way of storytelling. Within New York City, these griot-like performances of poetry, music and storytelling by artists such as Jalal Mansur Nuriddin and The Last Poets had great influential impact on the post civil rights era and culture of the 1960s and 70s.

Hip Hop arose during the 1970s when block parties became common in New York, especially in the Bronx. These parties were usually accompanied by music and people throughout the neighborhood would gather into the streets to dance, party and to be entertained by the performing artists. DJs at these block parties used the technique of isolating the percussion breaks from popular tracks to make the songs easier for the audience to dance to. This particular technique was popular in Jamaica and spread to New York City via the substantial Jamaican immigrant coined as the ‘godfather’ of hip hop, Clive Campbell, better known as Hercules (for his muscular build), and later as Kool Herc.

Herc was one of the most popular DJs in early 70s New York, he went from using reggae records to funk, rock, and later disco when he realized that reggae was not among the popular genre of music. Due to the percussive breaks being so short, generally lasting about 30 seconds, Herc and other DJs began using an audio mixer and two records. Eventually, the technique of mixing and scratching developed along with the breaks, this technique contributed greatly to the popularization of remixing songs. DJs and MCs would often add call and response chants, often compromised of a basic chorus, to allow the performer to prepare for the next part of their performance or to gather their thoughts. They would use chants such as “One, two, three y’all, to the beat y’all!” or “When I say ‘Hey!’, you say ‘Ho!’”

Later, MCs grew more varied in their vocal and rhythmic approach in performances by incorporating short and witty rhymes. While Kool Herc and the Herculoids were the first hip hoppers to gain major fame in New York, more MCs began to gradually make their way onto the music scene. Most frequently, these collaborations were between former gang members such as Afrika Bambaata’s Universal Zulu Nation (which is now a large international organization). During the early 1970s, break dancing arose during block parties, as B-Boys and B-Girls got in front of audiences to dance using distinctive and complex dance moves. Break dancing became popular on the Hip Hop scene, and soon this form of dancing became incorporated with the hip hop culture. Not much longer after the introduction of break dancing, it was documented for release to a world-wide audience for the first time in documentaries and movies such as *Style Wars*, *Beat Street*, and *Wild Style*.

Reasons for the quick rise in hip hop, perhaps, may be in cause of the inexpensive cost of the equipment necessary to getting started; the decline of previous popular musical genre throughout the nation, such as disco, funk, and rock; or even because of the social and political events. For instance, in 1959, the Cross-Bronx Expressway was built through the heart of the borough by a man by the name of Park Commissioner Robert Moses, displacing many of the middle-class whites, Jewish, Italian, German and Irish communities and neighborhoods; thus, causing a widespread of unemployment amongst the remaining African Americans and Hispanics as the stores, factories and other businesses began to relocate to the other boroughs of New York City. Accompanying these poor people were crime, drug addiction, and more unemployment. Destitution was rampant and at its peak by the 1970s. When Moses then built a 15,382 unit co-op apartment complex on the northern edge of the Bronx, called Co-Op city in 1968, what was left of the middle class was siphoned, hence, the areas black and Hispanic gangs began to arise and grow in power.

With the 1980s, came major diversification of hip hop which developed into a more complex form. As technology evolved, so did the practice of manipulating beats with greater precision and meticulousness with a recombination in more complex new ways than was possible with vinyl alone. The content of the culture evolved as well. Whereas before, in 1970s the MCs told simple tales with their rhymes, by the 80s those tales were replaced by highly metaphoric lyrics rapping over complex, multi-layered beats, some rappers even became mainstream pop artists/performers, including Kurtis Blow, who appeared in a commercial advertising for a Sprite campaign. This particular commercial made him the first hip hop performer to be considered mainstream enough to embody a major product, but this also made him a target amongst his minority audience as a sell-out. Another popular performer to be considered mainstream unto audiences around this time was L.L Cool J.

The late 1980s to the mid 90s was regarded by many as hip hop’s Golden Age. This era claimed some of the most influential and greatest hip hop artists in the hip hop culture and gave way to the first female hip hop artists to ever hit the scene. A few notable artists of this age were Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap, Masta Ace, Biz Markie, Roxanne Shante, Boogie Down Productions, KRS-One, D-Nice, DJ Scott La Rock, Public Enemy, Run DMC, N.W.A, Slick Rick, Notorious B.I.G, Tupac Shakur, Nas, Jay-Z, Salt-n-Pepa, MC Lyte, Queen Latifa, Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Lauryn Hill, Yo-Yo, etc. In the early 80s, hip hop and rap music became politicized when Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released a message rap called *The Message* in 1982; this was one of the earliest examples of recorded hip hop with a socially aware tone. Also, the 80s saw the rise of the first black female hip hop group, Salt-n-Pepa, who hit the charts with singles like *The Show Stoppa* in 1985.

In concurrence with the rise of political rap came the introduction of gangsta rap which depicted a lifestyle of sex, drugs, and violence in inner-city America like no other genre of music had ever done. The first gangsta rap album to gain a big audience, selling more than 2.5 million copies, was N.W.A’s *Straight Outta Compton* (1988). Their usage of contentious subject matter such as drugs, violence, and sex helped to popularize what became known as gangsta rap. The song *F \*\*\* the Police* is what earned the foursome the enmity of law enforcement, garnering attention from the F.B.I. By the 1990s, gangsta rap became mainstream, beginning with the release of Dr. Dre’s notorious album, *The Chronic*, which established a style of gangsta rap called ‘g funk’, this soon came to govern West Coast Hip Hop. Other artists such as Tupac Shakur (also known as 2Pac), who started his rapping career in 1991, would also dominate in the 90s, not only the West Coast hip hop culture, but all over, became the highest selling rapper ever, by selling over 75,000,000 albums world-wide. The Notorious B.I.G rose to fame around the same time and being from New York, he brought the East Coast back into the rap game when the West Coast mainly dominated it. He and West coast rapper 2Pac played a major role in the East Coast West coast rivalry during the 90s, ending with both rappers being shot coincidentally in the mid 90s. As the decade advanced, hip hop had altered from the more or less “old school” rhythmic rap to a more melodic sound that incorporates the elements of jazz, classical, pop, reggae, and many other genres. Through this transformation, hip hop has given birth to the subgenres of snap music and crunk music.

The shooting deaths of Notorious B.I.G and Tupac Shakur, two of hip hop’s martyrs, and efforts to repress the explicit music only served to make it more appealing to youth. And as hip hop continues to commemorate its 30-plus years, many are reflecting on its noteworthy history, implausible rise and ever unpredictable future. Oftentimes celebrated, sometimes contentious, but indisputably influential and significant, there is no doubt that the $4 billion-dollar-a year-hip hop industry is an artistic occurrence the likes of which has never been seen. Despite all this, the music of hip hop is beginning to decline in sales and fame; many ask if hip hop is indeed dying from the mainstream. There are some old school rappers who disapprove of crunk and snap music, arguing that it is the reason that hip hop music is dying. Which leads to the trendy rhetorical question, “Is Hip Hop Dead??”